DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 414 131 RC 021 277

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TITLE A Hero's Journey: A Freshman Orientation Challenge Course Program.
PUB DATE 1997-11-00
NOTE 9p.; In: Deeply Rooted, Branching Out, 1972-1997. Annual AEE International Conference Proceedings; see RC 021 269.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Adventure Education; *College Freshmen; Courses; *Experiential Learning; Higher Education; *Mythology; *Student Development
IDENTIFIERS Archetypes; *California State University Fresno; Freshman Orientation; Rites of Passage; *Rope Courses

ABSTRACT

At California State University, Fresno, all incoming students take a full-semester, three-unit course that includes topics on academic preparation but also focuses on issues and topics commonly associated with experiential and adventure education. These areas include communication, listening, teamwork, and problem-solving skills. Recognizing the applicability of experiential education to reinforce such skills, a pilot program was undertaken using the campus ropes course. Since college represents an ideal rite of passage for many students, it seemed appropriate to borrow from Joseph Campbell's monomyth, a hero's journey. The program guides students through the ropes course along the steps described in Campbell's "Hero with a Thousand Faces." Myths are an effective means of facilitating educational experiences because they are remembered easily, are open to interpretation, and engage participants in the same manner as an initiative activity might. The stages of the hero's journey are the separation or departure, the trials and victories of initiation, and the return and reintegration with society. These stages are reconceptualized in terms of the college student's experience. Program activities related to each of the stages are described, and 13 questions for reflection are listed. (SV)

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A Hero's Journey: A Freshman Orientation Challenge Course Program

ED 414 131

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ABSTRACT

In conjunction with the university orientation class at California State University, Fresno, a ropes course program is being developed using experiential education to reinforce the skills taught in the classroom. Using the framework of Joseph Campbell's monomyth, a hero's journey, the components of this program are designed to foster skills for a successful academic experience while also demonstrating the powerful experience college offers in providing a rite of passage — an opportunity to "cross the threshold."

At Fresno State University, a full-semester, three-unit course is offered to all incoming students. The course, framed by the text *Cornerstone* by Montgomery, Moody, and Sherfield (1997), includes topics on academic preparation but also focuses on issues and topics commonly associated with adventure education, such as communication, listening, community/teamwork, and problem-solving skills. Recognizing the applicability of experiential education to reinforce these skills, a pilot program was undertaken to use the campus ropes course. Since college represents an ideal rite of passage for many students, it seemed appropriate to borrow from Joseph Campbell's monomyth, a hero's journey. Using this framework, a program was developed to guide students through the ropes course along the steps described in Campbell's *Hero With a Thousand Faces* (1968).

RC 021277

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Importance of Myth

Some will have difficulty using myth to facilitate educational experiences. The power of myth can lead to frustration. Stories are inherently nebulous and require thought and imagination to receive their value and meaning. The message may be illusive to younger participants or, perhaps, older ones who have locked out their imagination. However, since personal change requires imagination, it is well worth the effort in opening a person's head and heart to these stories.

One reason myths are effective is that people remember stories more than facts and, like metaphors, stories are experiential. They engage the participant in the same manner an initiative activity might. Stories are open to interpretation; they are less directive. They allow the participant to take ownership in their meaning.

The Hero

The monomyth of a hero's journey is derived from the least common denominators of traditional myths and stories; in Jungian terms, the monomyth is an archetype. This archetype, in turn, presents a pattern for the ideal hero. Traditional views of a hero conjure up images of rugged individualism: Clint Eastwood, John Wayne, and Rambo. These typically male characters go it alone, lick their wounds, and pull themselves up by their bootstraps. They are resourceful but isolated, perhaps lonely figures. This hero may be seen as a warrior, savior, scientist, and technologist — each a solitary figure tackling life's challenges alone. Although characteristically American, this persona can be found defining a hero throughout the ages —Hercules, King Arthur, and Hamlet. Indeed, Joseph Campbell describes the Knights of the Round Table setting out for the grail as: "Each man went into the woods in

the place where it was darkest and there was no path, for they thought it would be a shame to go in as a group" (Campbell, 1968).

This notion of a hero is incomplete. The true hero according to this monomyth does not ride off into the sunset alone. The complete journey of the hero brings the individual back into the community. Indeed, today's model for a hero would be one who finds comfort and growth in society, family, and friends. The hero metaphor, or monomyth, engenders a powerful symbolic meaning for the journey that students or anyone in their late teens and early twenties undertakes.

Stages of the Journey

The hero myth is an experience conducted in the context of a symbolic journey. It engenders a rite of passage based on the universal monomyth of the hero's journey.

One component of the journey is ritual. In all societies, people embark on rituals to transform themselves, often to enter a new stage in life. The purpose and actual effects of these rituals are to conduct people across those difficult thresholds of transformation that demand a change in the patterns, not only of conscious, but also of unconscious life. College is often the place where students begin their journey. Though teenagers may go through many rites of passage (e.g., driver's license, jobs, dating, etc.), none follow the stages of the hero's journey more closely than college. Campbell noted three phases: *the separation or departure, trials and victories of initiation, and the return and reintegration with society.* The adventure education component begins with students listening to a simple fairytale such as The Frog Prince. A discussion on the hero's journey will ensue. Afterward the students are asked to identify heroes in their life. Invariably these are family members who have overcome obstacles and been an inspiration (see attached form).

Separation & Departure

The first stage to any adventure is the decision of whether to go. The metaphor of the "call to adventure" can be directly related to the student. Alexander Astin's research on college freshmen showed that students who lived on campus experienced more success with their college experience than those living at home (Astin, 1993). It appears that breaking away from the family provides an essential ingredient in seeking one's own path.

The challenge-by-choice principle is critical at this stage. The student must rely on his or her own volition in attempting adventure activities. The discussion will center on whether the student is willing to take this step in college. On the ropes course many initiatives or trust elements can be used as the taking-off point.

Almost invariably the "call" is negative and initially refused. "I'm not going up there!" "I can't get that close to people." "I don't trust them." College freshman may pick "safe" majors and not test their abilities or, indeed, may not select any major.

These are common reactions to the call. If the call is refused, you run the risk of life drying up. To paraphrase Steven Covey: "You may ascend the ladder of success only to find it was up against the wrong wall" (Covey, 1989). Regrets are known to wreak severe psychological damage, more than suffering failures.

Whether the call was accepted or refused, the essential next phase recognizes the need for assistance. In mythology, a troll, magical crone, or amulet will appear. In life, this can be the insight that we have the power inside us to overcome obstacles. "Remember, Luke, the force is with you." On many of the initiatives and high elements, students are amazed that they could succeed at what seemed like an insurmountable task. Discussion can

center on what it was that allowed you to succeed. During our program, we use the high "v" and giant ladder to illustrate this metaphorically and realistically. It is important to show that we can succeed with resources within ourselves, but also college freshman need to learn to avail themselves of external resources. Specifically, the friends made in the classroom and the ropes course become integral to their success.

The Crossing of the First Threshold

The hero's path is through a dark forest where no one has entered. Though risky, the perils are worse to return. "To venture causes anxiety, but not to venture is to lose oneself. And to venture in the highest sense is precisely to become conscious of oneself," wrote Soren Kierkegaard.

The first challenge due to its novelty is often the most intimidating, for the student steps forward alone into the unknown. The worldwide myth of being swallowed by a serpent or whale is a powerful metaphor symbolizing death and rebirth. In mythology, the stories consistently illustrate that we cannot be born until we have died. In psychological terms, we cannot change behaviors unless we shed our previous self.

Trials and Victories of Initiation

Initiation is a critical component of a journey. Unfortunately our secular society fails to provide for rites of passage in any ritualistic manner. Typically, first job, first kiss, or driver's license; or on the other hand, gang initiation or fraternity hazing must suffice to help us with passage from teen to adult. At this level, the participant experiences trials and tribulations associated with failures and successes. But most importantly she or he receives feedback from the group.

Following soon after the victory is often a refusal to do more because consciously the student believes they must. This is a tough area to work on.

Their trepidation stems from the sense that the success was luck. This deterministic outlook hinders progress. When students do progress, they face the full power of their higher self working together with their conscious mind to control destiny.

Applications on the ropes course center on high elements. We ask that students going across the catwalk go back. This return trip forces them to realize success was not fleeting.

The Return and Reintegration with Society

The classic image of the hero riding off into the sunset provides a great Hollywood cliché. Unfortunately it also negates the most important phase of the journey: coming home. The purpose of the journey is the return to a transmuted form of life in the real world. When Odysseus returned from years away from home, he returned to chaos. Skills garnered during his travails allowed him to bring order.

Sometimes this return is refused for fear that the knowledge will be lost or the student may be in fear of the return and, thus, deny what she or he learned. We often hear from students how disillusioned they are with friends from high school who stayed home. Voluntarily or not, the student must return and face the people in his or her life, people who have not been on the quest. Though this is a difficult area to delve into on the ropes course, it does provide important fodder for the closing discussion.

Conclusion

To paraphrase Joseph Campbell, the student (hero) is now the master of two worlds and has the freedom to live. The student is now conceptualized as in control and free of fears and preconceived limitations. We know intuitively that the student experiences some important transition during the college years. Use of adventure education may facilitate this process in vari-

ous ways. The most cited studies on higher education are those from Alexander Astin's work over the past thirty years. *What Matters in College* is a seminal text which delineates the important components of making a successful student. Traditional definitions of success such as retention, good grades, and other measures are expanded in his study to underline the experiences which promote talent development. What factors not only increase retention, but also promote success after college? Matters by which we usually evaluate our institutions, such as reputation and resources, turned out to have little significance in talent development. Findings pointed to engaged learning and peer groups as the two most important factors. Nothing could be more relevant to experiential education. One model for applying an experiential component may be the hero's journey.

(Exercise for beginning of the program)

Your Hero's Path

1. Name a hero in your life.

2. What characterizes this person as a hero?

3. What parts of your life mirror that of the hero's journey?

Phase 1. Separation or Departure

4. Have you traveled for an extended period? Gone away to college? Moved to another country or state for employment? Or just picked up and left your hometown?

5. Even if you stay in the physical setting in which you grew up, the hero's journey can be an adventure on the psyche. Have you made sudden and dramatic career changes? Are you on a markedly different path than siblings? Were/are you a rebellious teen?

6. What was the call to adventure?

7. Did you heed all calls or refuse some? Any regrets?

Phase 2. The Road of Trials and the Victories of Initiation:

8. If you took the call, what challenges did you contend with? What gave you the strength and ability to handle these?

9. What were the rites of passage or initiations in your life?

10. What impact on your life did these trials have?

11. From these changes, what do you want to hold on to?

Phase 3. The Return and Reintegration with Society

12. Did you willingly return to your home, community, or roots? Are you still there?

13. If you returned, how were you welcomed? What does/did it feel like to be back?

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